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ABSTRACT

Many recent studies have revealed a dramatic increase in teacher absenteeism. Some findings indicate that absenteeism increases following collective bargaining agreements that provide a set number of days that employees may be compensated for illness. There appears to be a growing public reaction to such absenteeism. A New York study noted that substitute teachers are significantly less effective than regular teachers. This suggests that when regular teachers are absent, there is a cutback in student achievement. As the number of teacher absences continues to rise, so does the financial burden of paying the substitutes. Also, increased teacher absences mean a corresponding increase in the time and energy the principal spends with this problem. Too, teacher absences affect extracurricular activities, committee meetings, and conferences. Several partial solutions to these problems have been considered including requiring higher qualifications for substitutes, requiring contract teachers to have lesson plans ready for absence days, offering inservice preparations for substitutes, appointing a teacher to assist the principal in dealing with teacher absences, and rewarding good attendance by returning to the regular staff some of the money saved by good attendance. Several programs in school districts throughout the nation illustrate these and other methods for handling absenteeism. (Author/JM)

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The Practitioner

A Newsletter for the On-Line Administrator

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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ABSENT TEACHERS

. . . Another handicap for students?

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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"A sub is only a sub. They don't improve the educational program."

"You can't really replace a teacher . . . . You should not expect comparable results. Teacher absences hurt student progress more than is realized."

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NASSP

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

These and similar comments are heard frequently today among administrators because of the growing frequency of teacher absenteeism. The American school was founded on the premise that learning is dependent to a great degree upon interaction between students and teachers. Yet, the educational and financial costs mount as solid student-teacher contact is eroded by a new phantom of the classroom, the missing teacher. How serious is this trend? How is it affecting schools? And how can it be resolved?

How Widespread?

Extensive studies of the problem of teacher absenteeism have been completed in Merrick, N. Y.; Las Vegas; New York City; Chicago's north suburban schools; California; Illinois; and Indiana. The results in every study demonstrate a dramatic increase in teacher absenteeism. As additional days are made available to teachers through collective bargaining, it appears that more of those days are being taken by teachers and more teachers are taking those days!

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An interesting sidelight concerns a study of administrator absences in the north suburban Chicago area. The data show the absence rate for teachers to be more than three times that of administrators in the same geographic areas and the same school systems.[1]

Some of the important general findings about teacher absenteeism from the Illinois, Indiana, Nevada, and California reports indicate these central points:[2]

- Absenteeism among all teachers increased after the enactment of collective bargaining legislation.
- Demographic factors including age, gender, salary, continuous employment, and marital status do not have a significant impact on the amount of absenteeism.
- Absenteeism has continued to increase since the passage of collective bargaining legislation despite better pay, smaller classes, and more appropriate assignments.
- The highest rate of absenteeism occurs the day before and the day after the weekend.
- High levels of absenteeism occur in school districts where there are low levels of faculty agreement toward the goals and policies of the community and school district. These high levels of absenteeism occur even in those school districts with high levels of material incentives and pleasant physical environments.
- Low levels of absenteeism among teachers occur in those districts with high levels of community support and policy agreement, regardless of low levels of material inducement and unpleasant physical conditions faced by the teachers.[3]

Newspaper editorials are beginning to express the growing public reaction to teacher absenteeism. For example:

> Sick pay is just a benefit which, through abuse, is becoming a problem. For years many governmental as well as business and industrial establishments operated either on the theory that absence through illness was the responsibility of the

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1. Educational Policy Advisory Committee report to the District 219 Board of Education, Skokie, Ill., June 13, 1977.
2. D. Lee Bundren, "The Influence of Situational and Demographic Factors on the Absentee Patterns of Teachers" (Report to the Clark County, Nev., School District, 1974).
3. Dennis W. Spuck, "Reward Structure in the Public School," *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Winter 1974.

> individual and need not be compensated, or under an unofficial system of paying for absence due to illness on a case-by-case paternalistic basis. The growth of unions brought a change in that. Unions insisted that there should be compensation for illness, and so gradually sick pay provisions were negotiated into an increasing number of contracts. They normally provide a set number of days during which an employee may be compensated for illness—the number often growing with seniority.
>
> Most agreed there was both justice and orderliness in the concept. But it was never contemplated that because a person was entitled to be paid for, say, five days illness in a given year or period, he was entitled to those days off whether ill or not.
>
> Nevertheless, a sort of custom has arisen under which many employees take those days as a right whether they are ill or not. In our view, that is morally wrong.
>
> Further, it hurts economically. Where public agencies are involved it can add to taxes. Where business and industry are concerned it can add to consumer costs. That is especially true in cases, like those of teachers, where substitutes must be hired instead of spreading the work among other employees.[4]

Clearly, a growing segment of the public is beginning to ask some hard questions of teachers who use their sick leave for convenience rather than as a necessity.

What Are the Instructional Costs?

The cost in student learning when the regular teacher is absent is undoubtedly the most critical cost with which the administrator must concern himself. In one study of student achievement researchers demonstrated that when cutbacks occurred in school contact time there were also cutbacks in student achievement.[5] A New York Metropolitan School Study Council review of 18,000 teachers noted that substitute teachers were significantly less effective in classrooms than the regular teachers. Worse still, the study indicated that the substitutes were less effective than student teachers when they were put in charge of a classroom.

This table details the ratings by teacher classification:

4. "Sick on Sick Pay," *Gary Post Tribune*, Gary, Ind., 13 February 1976, p. A4.
5. Annegret Harmischfeger and David E. Wiley, "Schooling Cutbacks & Achievement Declines: Can We Afford Them?" *Administrator's Notebook* XXIV (1975).

MEAN SCORE OF OBSERVATIONS

by

TYPE OF TEACHER RANKED BY CLASSROOM EFFECTIVENESS
(High score indicates effectiveness)

	Mean Score	
	Elementary	Secondary
Regular Teacher	6.12	5.01
Specialist	5.82	4.99
Student Teacher	5.62	2.76
Substitute	1.98	0.27

In reviewing the ratings in this study format, a research bulletin published by Columbia University concluded that, "Being near zero leads to the conclusion that just nothing much was going on. . . ."[6]

M. N. Olson, who was also working with problems of quality in classrooms, reviewed the table with this response:

> What clearly stands out on this table is the abysmal performance of substitute teachers in contrast to that of the regular classroom teacher . . . . Either substitute teacher performance must be improved or alternatively less expensive methods of handling teacher absences should be initiated."[7]

If substitutes are as ineffective as the New York study and Olson suggest, there is concern that they actually constitute a cutback in real instructional time and consequently a cutback in student achievement.

Meanwhile, particularly clear to educators is the public's growing demand for some solid progress by students during the school year. The competency testing and "back to basics" movements throughout the country are emphatic testimony to the voting citizen's concerns for academic accomplishment. As the equation of teacher contact time with student progress becomes widely known, more hard questions will be asked about the causes of lost instruction at school. Certainly one serious loss occurs when regular teachers are absent and substitutes are in the classroom.

Student learning is the fundamental reason that schools exist. After busing disputes, negotiations, hearings, and the myriad other problems that seek resolution, the critical question which taxpayers

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6. New York State Office of Education Performance Review, *Teacher Absenteeism in New York City & the Cost Effectiveness of Substitute Teachers*, Albany: State Department of Education (January 1974).
7. M. N. Olson, "Identifying Quality in School Classrooms: Some Problems and Some Answers," Special report to the Metropolitan School Study Council, New York, N.Y. (January 1971, No. 5).

have the right to ask and for which professional educators will be held accountable is "What happened to students who passed this way?" And, if increasing absences by their teachers have resulted in loss of achievement, then must not those absences be reduced?

What Are the Financial Costs?

As the number of teacher absences continues to rise, so does the financial burden of paying the substitutes who must fill the absented classrooms. In a study of the problem in Indiana, 86 percent of the districts reported an increased percentage of substitute costs over the last five years. Other studies also report a significant overall percentage increase in the cost for substitutes.

Inflationary factors in the past few years make actual dollar comparisons for the time period somewhat meaningless. The fact that the *percentage* of the budget funds allocated for substitute teachers has increased in this time period, however, demonstrates the reality of the rising costs. And these large percentage increases have come when most schools were operating with severe budget cutbacks. In addition, such increases have occurred at a time when many larger districts have seen a reduction in the number of students and teachers, a situation which should have reduced total employee absences.

Actual dollar costs are frightening. In 1971-72, New York City alone was spending $71.5 million or nearly nine percent of the total teacher salary costs just for substitute teachers.[8] In Illinois during 1975, the estimated statewide expenditure for substitute teacher classrooms was $31.6 million.[9]

What Are the Management Costs?

Perhaps the most pressured of school management personnel is the building principal. Almost every district surveyed reported the primary responsibility for monitoring teacher absences and arranging for substitutes falls to the principal. One district reported the task was allocated to "the principal and his secretary," but no other report indicated a sharing of responsibility.

With the alarming increase in teacher absences at school goes a corresponding increase in the time and energy the principal spends with this problem. Some districts reported that in addition to the necessary clerical tasks associated with absences, the principal was required to observe the teaching of every substitute in the building each day. In large buildings an enormous amount of a principal's time would be required to meet this responsibility.

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8. New York State Office of Education Performance Review, *Teacher Absenteeism in New York City & the Cost Effectiveness of Substitute Teachers*, Albany: State Department of Education (January 1974).
9. Casey Banas, "Student Boom Over, State Educators Told," *Chicago Tribune*, 13 July 1977.

When the principal is dealing with substitute teachers he cannot be handling more important matters affecting the entire school. These leadership and management costs must also be counted in the price that students, the professional staff, and the public are paying for increasing teacher absences.

What Are the Organizational Costs?

Teachers play many roles in the total school program. Certainly they are critical to formal instruction in the classroom but they also are central to the informal learning which occurs in clubs, activities, publications, and a host of other extracurricular areas which they direct or sponsor. When regular teachers are absent, the activities simply are eliminated or postponed. For many students this loss of informal instruction is severe; indeed, perhaps as severe as that sustained when the teacher is absent from the formal classroom.

Teacher presence is also required for the planning and development processes that take place in the democratic school building or district. Poor teacher attendance at committee meetings or conferences make such events far less representative or productive than they should be. In some cases excessive teacher absences simply make such processes impossible. One frustrated superintendent reported that he had virtually given up on cooperative planning and development.

Another high cost of teacher absenteeism is the loss of credibility by the education profession. Parents and students who look to teachers as responsible role models cannot help but be disturbed when those very people display questionable behavior in the performance of their duty. Sick teachers certainly should not go to school, and teachers should not be denied time for serious family emergencies. When the teacher absence rate dramatically and consistently increases on the days before and after the weekend, however, the public wonders about the timing and reality of the reported illness.

Possible Solutions

As collective bargaining matures and becomes more widespread, there is little reason to expect the bargaining units to ask for fewer days of leave. In addition, there seems little reason to believe teachers won't continue to use the days granted. This situation cannot be allowed to degenerate; schools cannot operate with part-time teachers.

If there are no easy and obvious solutions, at least there are some possibilities that may be considered. In many localities the substitutes who are spending increased time in schools can be expected to provide more than student-sitting services. Today there are

many substitutes who have the credentials and presumably the skills of regular contract teachers. With this change in the qualifications of the substitutes, a result of the depressed job market, schools could begin to expect real instruction from the substitutes. Such performance would, of course, require sufficient pre-absence preparation by the contract teacher. Perhaps the contract teacher's pay for the absent day could be contingent upon such sufficient preplanning.

A second initiative might be to provide inservice preparation time for persons to be employed as substitutes. If they have already received an orientation to building forms, procedures, schedules, expectations, etc., then when they arrive for their assignment they will be in a position to spend time on instruction. They also will be able to act with more confidence. Inservice sessions in each of the subject areas can be helpful. For example, if substitutes assigned to classes in the English Department are already aware of the curriculum and materials used in that department, they will be better able to step into an instructional role.

While regulations or pressures for more and better pre-absence instructional plans will lighten supervisory routines, assisting the already overburdened principal with monitoring absences will also help. Perhaps an assistant principal or a designated teacher could be released from some regular duties to serve in this way. The tasks relinquished could more easily be reassigned than could those the principal would give up.

A system that recognizes good attendance and rewards it in some significant way is a fourth approach to the problem. One possibility is to return to the regular teaching staff some of the monies saved by good attendance records.

A fifth suggestion is to insist on more teacher responsibility for the continuity of instruction. This would have to be gained at the bargaining table and could be accomplished by linking payment for absences to good advance class preparation or by demanding solid documentation of the need for absences.

Principals can take some personal initiatives that are not necessarily related to policy or policy revisions. For example:

- Praise good attendance. Make teachers who go the extra mile feel appreciated. Write a note; make a positive comment.

- Show concern for teachers who have been absent; ask them how they are feeling. They will feel awkward if they were not actually sick and they will appreciate your interest if they had a health problem.

- Keep your own records—a simple card file will do. Talk to teachers about frequent Monday and Friday absences. Note it on evaluation reports.

- If you cannot convince a teacher of the seriousness of poor attendance, issue a letter to the teacher documenting your concern. This shows that you consider excessive absenteeism to be a serious matter.

- Provide an example. Discipline the serious offender and make certain your own attendance record stands up to scrutiny.

Finally, perhaps, let the teachers themselves monitor the operation. In the Gary, Ind., schools many years ago, the teachers reportedly determined who was paid for an absence. The pool of substitute funds was given their committee in September; what was left was distributed to all teachers in June. The system had its flaws, but there weren't many absences!

Whatever approach is used, its ultimate success depends upon the cooperation of responsible teachers. As a starting point, the handicaps placed on students by heavy teacher absenteeism is a good basis for discussion of the problem. Only the most callous of teachers can ignore the fact that students are affected by heavy teacher absenteeism.

To Illustrate

Bettendorf Senior High School — Bettendorf, Iowa 52722
Robert C. Stevens, Principal

At Bettendorf teacher absenteeism is handled according to whether or not the absence was anticipated. Those planned for in advance are called "advance notice absences" while sudden absences such as illness are defined as "unplanned absences."

For the advance notice absence, detailed lesson plans are developed by the classroom teacher, who then meets with the designated substitute and reviews class activities and expected outcomes. During the teacher's absence the substitute works at the direction of the departmental team leader and/or division leader. The administrative adviser to the department observes the classroom for short periods of time to assess the substitute's performance and offer any needed support. Upon return of the regular classroom teacher the substitute submits a detailed progress report citing significant transactions occurring during his/her tenure. Substitute teachers judged by the administrator and team leader to be ineffective are removed from a preferred list.

For an unplanned absence the teacher calls a special operator requesting a substitute, stating length and reason for the absence. The operator then selects a substitute from an approved list of people certified to teach in the specific subject area needed. Upon reporting to the school, the substitute checks in at the main office for a conference with the department team and/or division leader. At this time the absentee teacher's lesson plans are reviewed and plans for the day are finalized. If possible, the substitute will contact the teacher by telephone for any additional instructions. During the day the substitute will receive assistance from the team leader and will be visited by the appropriate administrator. At the end of the substitute period a detailed report is submitted by the substitute to the teacher.

Recommendations have been made to the central office to implement an inservice program for substitute teachers dealing with building policies and procedures and unique instructional techniques being used in the district for classroom management.

Township High School District 113 Highland Park, Ill. 60035
Karl R. Plath, Superintendent

The Highland Park and Deerfield High Schools are trying something new. A limited number of full-time substitutes with different teaching backgrounds are being employed on a daily basis whether or not substitutes are needed. If no substitute is required in a teaching field on a particular day, the unassigned "permanent substitute" will serve in other ways, including extracurricular assignments, in the building.

Responsibility for substitute teachers currently begins with the individual teacher, with the department chairman and the principal also playing key roles. The quality of the substitute's work is monitored, and only those who perform well are called back.

Niles North High School Skokie, Ill. 60076
Gilbert Weldy, Principal

At Niles North High School all teachers are expected to have on file with the substitute teachers' clerk (who begins at 6:30 each morning) a set of instructions for the substitute. The substitute teacher is required to complete a report form for the regular teacher once the substitute's responsibility has been completed. If teachers are absent from only one or two classes, other available teachers in the building are hired to take the absented class.

Principal Weldy indicates a substitute teacher's workshop is conducted in the fall. Substitute teachers are oriented and provided with basic information about the school and its program as well as the roles and responsibilities of a substitute.

An alternate plan of no substitutes has been used sparingly by a few teachers since 1972. In this plan teachers who are going to be absent one or two days may elect to have no substitute and provide assignments which may be completed in the library, resource area, or other learning area. This plan may cause overcrowded conditions in the resource center and library/media center and result in poor student accounting. It was most popular in the practical arts area where it is extremely difficult to find qualified substitutes.

The majority of the teachers, however, still prefer to have a qualified substitute to carry out their lesson plan assignments.

Pueblo School District No. 60 Pueblo, Colo. 81004
Robert R. Freeman, Superintendent

Pueblo schools have difficulty locating enough qualified substitutes, especially for special education assignments. Workshops to prepare regular substitutes to cope emotionally with the needs of handicapped students have been helpful. Retired teachers are employed to strengthen the list of substitute teachers.

Superintendent Freeman reported a special workshop for substitute teachers was conducted in September 1978. A special handbook covering all aspects of prospective assignments was prepared and distributed. Discussions at all instructional levels were conducted in an effort to improve future working relations and the quality of the substitute teaching.

Teachers contact an answering service when reporting illness. They are encouraged to request a specific substitute and to use the same substitute if a later illness occurs. Every effort is made to comply with the request. Substitute teachers are assigned to their teaching field if at all possible and to schools close to their homes to shorten driving time.

Evaluation forms are provided to substitute teachers so they may evaluate their experiences. Substitute teachers are encouraged to discuss their experiences with the principal in a continuous effort to improve the quality of instruction.

Millburn Junior High School — Millburn, N.J. 07041
H. Richard Conover, Principal

Principal Conover reports a drop in the quality of qualified substitutes, while the number of staff requesting leave for illness, personal and professional days has increased slightly the past three years.

Advertising efforts in the local paper have proved minimally helpful. Conover suggests that a personal appeal to PTA parents might create a larger pool of qualified substitute teachers. Conover also reports of other school districts that conduct training sessions for prospective substitute teachers. Such workshops do a creditable job in orienting and preparing substitute teachers, although the programs have not been successful in recruiting new substitutes.

The plan used at present in the Millburn Township Public Schools is traditional, with prospective substitute teachers being interviewed by a school administrator and receiving instruction concerning school system procedures and the educational program. A substitute teacher folder is provided with the necessary information concerning routine procedures and the activities for the school day. The substitute teacher is expected to report on each class taught. Department chairpersons have the responsibility for getting each substitute teacher started on the day's activities.

Elkhart Memorial High School — Elkhart, Ind. 46514
Palmer Mart, Principal

The Elkhart Community Schools have developed a comprehensive, detailed plan for substitute teachers. Substitutes are expected to be fully qualified for the tasks they are assigned. All assignments are made through the Personnel Office after they have been cleared by the building principal.

Substitute teachers are encouraged to feel a part of the instructional staff. They are welcomed and urged to:

- Attend all or any part of the regular preschool orientation program
- Visit classes and principals (make arrangements through the principal)
- Confer with consultants and other teachers.

A substitute teacher holding a valid Indiana teacher's certificate and who is a member of the Indiana State Teachers Retirement Fund, and who substitutes 120 days, receives one year of credit toward retirement and one year of credit on the Elkhart teacher's salary schedule.

Substitute teachers receive extensive information about the schools, their procedures and aids for the substitute teacher.

The regular teacher provides advance lesson plans, seating charts, duplicate class rolls, textbooks with assignments marked, and an alternate lesson plan in case the substitute needs one, while the principal provides information regarding special activities, etc.

This *Practitioner* was developed by Donald C. Manlove, professor of education at Indiana University, and by Peggy Elliott, assistant professor of education, at Indiana University Northwest, Gary campus. The NASSP Research Department would welcome other examples of effective programs which reduce teacher absenteeism.

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